

The Bound Knight.

968 YK Lady Ana rubbed tired rheumy eyes. She was exhausted. The sound of a baby squalling echoed down the stone passages of her house. Would they never stop? An older child, thirteen or fourteen, lucky not to have been drafted to fight already, came running up to her. "Another refugee," he said simply. She sighed deeply and followed him to the entrance hall of what, until she began taking in those who'd lost their families in the war, had been her manor house. There at the entrance stood her young daughter Orpheia cradling a bundle of swaddling in her arms, her face creased with a dark frown. Ana thought she understood her meaning — someone had seen fit to abandon a child with them that they couldn't look after. And then her daughter twitched aside the grubby cloth and showed her the baby's face. "Oh dear," said Ana. The baby's milky white eyes blinked up at her from a face as pale as snow. It gazed at her for a few moments and then, perhaps in instinct, its eyes and hair took on the shades of the motherly face looking down at it, its skin flushing to a healthy tan. "Oh dear," said Ana once again, as the baby gurgled happily.

982 YK "Stop it," shouted Orpheia! The tall boy with the sandy blonde hair stared at her dumbstruck then began to shift. He lost a few inches in height and his shoulders became less broad. He became much younger and his hair darkened to a lank brown which was his normal look. "But you like Thomas," he said. "I can look just like him," he pleaded. "It's horrible," said the girl turning her back on him. She was eight or nine years older than him, very nearly a grown woman. "Thomas is going to be a knight," she said proudly. "He's going to fight werewolves and... and things. It's wrong to look like other people, Niall. I shant like you if you do that and you'll never join the Silver Flame. Your soul will be wandering Eberon forever all alone." The boy hung his head filled with shame and guilt. "I'm sorry, Orph," he said tagging along behind her as she strode away. "I wont change again, I swear, not ever." The boy picked up a stick and made sweeping sword swipes with it. "I'll be a knight too," he said trying to make her smile, "I'll be the best knight there ever was."

994 YK Seargent Othero watched the knights doing battle, all were good, but one stood out. "What's his name," he asked the teacher? "That's Niall, Sir. I don't think we've ever had one quite like him. And a true believer." Othero watched as the knight whirled and span through a group of students armed with wooden swords. Not one of them landed a blow. Moments later the four students were on the mat looking surprised. Othero laughed, which he rarely did these days. "Do you have any doubts about his courage," he asked? "None," said the teacher, "he'll follow you to Khyber if you ask." "He'll have to," replied Othero, his voice low. "That's where we're going."

994 YK Niall span, his blade was a ribbon of silver. Never had he fought so hard or been so single-minded in his actions. Around him lay the corpses of some several dozen ogres and eight of his brothers in arms. Only he and Othero fought on, deep beneath the Graywall mountains. Behind him, his commander was locked in single combat with the warlord they had come to kill. The enemy fought like one possessed, but Othero might still triumph if only Niall could hold off the reinforcements. He drove his sword hilt deep into barrel torso of an opponent and was rewarded with the sight of yet more of them charging up the tunnel towards him. His arms were like lead and his strength was finally failing when he heard a inhuman cry from behind. The ogres paused in their assault and Niall risked a look behind him to see the warlord's body slipping from Othero's axe. The knight of Thrane stooped swung and then rose with the corpse's head in his gauntleted fist. In one motion he swung it to Niall who caught it and held it up before the massed ogres. As one, they drew back before the severed remains of their god, then turned and fled into the darkness. Niall walked back into the cavern to assist his commander. Together they gazed down at the body. Niall sensed something dreadful about it, something that he couldn't quite see but knew was there. And then the presence was moving withdrawing and he sensed that it was trying to hide from them. His attention was drawn to a dark broach, a khyber shard set in Mithral, that the Warlord wore. Did it now have an aura that it didn't before? Something deep within the Knight, long buried, moved him to pick up the broach and pin it to his breast. Otheron laughed. "You'll be rewarded with greater wealth than that when we return," he said. "Why they ought to make me captain of the Knights of Thrane for this," he added. He clapped Niall on the back, "if we make it back, that is." "We'll make it back," said Niall with a smile, "The evil is gone now," he said quietly.

995 YK The sanctuary was empty in the winter. Usually it was used by monks seeking quiet for deep meditation or prayer. But being a good three days ride up the mountain from the monastery meant that most monks decided to be spiritual in the summer. Niall did not have that option however. He had to get away from others for everyone's sake. Maybe for the sake of Eberron itself. He had brought only what he needed — enough food for a couple of months, some tinder and kindling, the broach and a plate sized mirror. The snow continued to drift down outside as he positioned himself and the mirror near the fire, each gazing at the other. The broach was pinned over his heart. He could sense the evil in it, just as it could no doubt sense the good in him. He pictured the ruined villages that he and Othello and his fallen comrades had passed through. Made himself remember the bodies on the altars and the madness that had gripped the region. Something fell and terrible had been unleashed there and he couldn't bare to think of that evil here in Thrane, reaching out its claws for his people, his church, Orpheia. He smiled as he thought of his foster sister and her husband Thomas, who'd grown up to become a farmer, and he swore silently to the Silver Flame that this evil would stop with him.

He stared at the mirror and studied his face. For a frightening moment he thought that he was mad, that his memories of his childhood were some delusion, but it passed and he knew what to do. It was like looking at himself from a distance, as if Niall's whole life were nothing a game he'd played, just like he'd played at being a knight to impress Orpheia. The slight beard was first to go, melting away into his chin which softened from the stern, squared shape to a more pointed, feminine one. In the mirror, he watched his dark hair lengthen and lighten and grow fine as cobwebs while the weathered lines of his face smoothed to a pale eggshell. (S)He found her face smaller, more petite. The eyes were the last to go. For a moment, the Knight's wide horrified eyes stared out of the inhuman face in the mirror, before they lightened to a milky white with not even a trace of pupil left.

The presence in the broach stirred. 'So it is aware,' thought the changeling. He felt it casting about seeking a mind, but there was not another sentience within miles of this place. Experimentally, the changeling shifted his features a little, taking on some of the bone structure of the fallen warlord. He imagined what it must be like to be that warlord, cruel, worshipped. The response from the broach was dramatic. The presence within it reached out and touched his mind, prying, seeking understanding, but not trusting. The changeling let himself take on the role more fully, attempting to feel the very soul of the warlord. A sudden realization took him as he realized he was stronger than the warlord. With the guidance in the broach, he could go further than that petty tyrant had done. His features thickened, became more masculine again, but not like the knight's that he once was. He imagined the sacrifices made to him, tried to understand how he could enjoy such barbarity, and he did understand. The changeling nature so long forgotten let him take on that other personality. He felt the entity within the broach rushing into him, bonding with him, felt its power in his blood. There was a horrible moment of contact — a voice in his mind, and then some small part of him stepped back, distanced itself from who he was and shifted. The brave features of Sir Niall swam up out of his warping face. The expression was resolute. The entity within him shuddered and gripped his mind, struggling for control, but the knight was firm. The presence began to disengage from him, uncertain, but he grabbed it with his mind and held on. The presence shook, this was unexpected, unprecedented. It had been fought against before, shut out, but never held in. Sir Niall prayed to the Silver Flame for strength, he would not let this evil loose. He slammed the evil thoughts down deep into himself and hid them. He was Sir Niall again, the life he had always lived. He looked at the old familiar features in the mirror and smiled grimly. "I have you now, Demon," he said to himself. "Just you and me."

Three years later Zirrah the Gnome stared up at the stranger. The Library of Korranberg attracted many strange visitors, but there was something grim about this knight that she couldn't put her finger on. He wasn't old particularly. Indeed he looked in particularly fine shape if you liked your men over four foot tall, which Zirrah did not. But there was something weary in his eyes that seemed to carry centuries of strain. Another veteran of the Last War, she supposed. "No appointment," she asked. She could send him away, but a sudden feeling of sympathy stopped her. He looked so... exhausted. "Well, you're in luck. It's very quiet at the moment. What with the murders no-one seems to want to leave their houses." Sharp eyes looked at her. "Murders?" he said. He had a clear Thranish accent. "Surely you've heard? Don't you at least read the Chronicle? People with their faces torn off, one a night, sometimes two or three. Horrible."

The knight looked at her sorrowfully. "I didn't know," he said, "I'm sorry."
"Well, not your fault I hope," she said with forced cheerfulness. "What was it you wanted to research."
"Demons," he replied.
"Anything about them in particular," she asked?
"How to kill them," said the Knight. "Tell me how they die."

Niall, Female Changeling, Paladin 3 / Monk 6. CR: 9; HD 3d10 + 6d8 + 18; hp 75; Init: +7; Spd 50 ft.; AC 20 (flat-footed 17); Base Atk: +7; Atk: +11 melee (1d8+4/19-20 x2 Longsword +2); Flurry of Blows: +10 / +10 melee (1d8+4/19-20 x2 Longsword +2); SA Stunning Fist, Ki Strike, Unarmed Strike Smite Evil / Smite Good 1/day*; SQ Minor Change Shape, +2 Save vs. Sleep and Charm, Aura of Good / Aura of Evil*, Still Mind, Evasion, Purity of Body, Aura of Courage / Aura of Despair*, Lay on Hands; AL LG / CE*; SV Fort +10, Ref + 9, Will + 9; Str 14, Dex 16, Con 15, Int 11, Wis 16, Cha 12. Skills and Feats: Bluff 2, Intimidate 2, Concentration 8, Knowledge (Religion) 5, Knowledge (Demons) 7, Balance 5, Climb 4, Hide 6, Move Silently 3, Sense Motive 2, Stunning Fist, Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative (+4), Weapon Focus (Longsword), Whirling Steel Strike, Knight Training.
Languages: Common, Infernal*
Possessions: Bracers of Armour +3, Longsword +2, Potion of Cure Moderate Wounds x4, Potion of Haste x2, Potion of Bull's Strength x3

*Niall's evil aligned abilities only manifest when the Demon is in control.

The changeling Niall has spent most of her life as a Knight of Thrane. Nobody knows her as anything else and this is indeed how she thinks of herself. However her changeling nature, long repressed, could not be denied and when she fought against the Demon Naf, it found its release. In an attempt to stop the demon that had possessed the Warlord from finding a new host and once more wreaking havoc, Niall opened herself up to possession. Offered the powerful champion, Naf could not resist. Niall proved strong, however. Stronger than Naf could believe. And now the powerful demon is trapped within the changeling, locked into a permanent battle of wills, while his body lies senseless and helpless. It is Naf's fear, and Niall's aim, that she should find this body, and finding it, slay the demon. Until this is done, Niall dare not release the demon, dare not die and dare not let her iron control slip, lest she should become the demon's puppet. And so she seeks the demon's body, through study, legends and divinations, travelling the length and breadth of Eberron in her search.

But Niall has been searching for three years now. That is three years in which she has been locked in mental combat with Naf. Although she denies it to her Knight self, the paladin monk that is loyal to Thrane, a new personality has begun to emerge. Taking on a new face, racked with violence and insanity, the Naf is breaking out. Murders follow the knight, the victims found with their faces gone, a deadly game has begun between the two sides of the changeling's divided mind. Neither fully knows what the other intends. One way or another, there has to be a winner soon.

Image: Sir Niall is a tall, handsome but war-weary knight. His strong face and commanding demeanor convey a strength both material and spiritual. He carries a fine longsword at his side and bracers on his arms with a small Ebberon shard set in each, but no armour. He moves with an easy grace.

Image: Naf is a fearsome sight. His face is jet black with a crimson hourglass mark down the face, reflecting the true form of the Bebbelith demon. When he moves, it is with a quick, spidery precision that seems not human somehow. Nor do the spindly limbs convey much humanity, more like an insect's impersonation of a man. His eyes are a dull yellow and his teeth black as onyx. Typically he covers himself with a dull brown travelling cloak to conceal this frightening visage and double-jointed limbs.

Adventure ideas:

Murders are occurring and a sense of fear is gripping the city. Nobody knows who or what the killer is, but only that he can strike anyone. The victims are found with their faces ripped away in their entirety which has made identification both difficult and traumatic. Meanwhile, a mysterious knight seems to know who the villain is, but won't tell the PCs. Why doesn't he want their help? Is he protecting the murderer, if so

why?

The PCs are hired to perform a strange task. They are asked to retrieve a book in the possession of a noted scholar. It is not a magical tome, but simply a history of the Graywall mountains. The owner of the book must not know that it is gone. Two nights later however, the PCs are hired to return the book, or is it a different one? In a similar fashion, perhaps interspersed with other adventures, the book resurfaces after it is sold to a mysterious knight seeking information from it. Is he about to be misled terribly by the information in the book? If so, where will it send him? Or is the fact that the PCs have become aware of the knight's search too much of a coincidence? What information or misinformation are they supposed to be passing on and for who? After more jobs, large or small, the PCs gradually become aware that they are being used in a covert and subtle game between two shadowy individuals.

The end is near, Niall cannot fight against Naf any longer. Either he must die, and the demon be released to wreak havoc in Eberron once more, or else the demon's sleeping form must be found and slain. After a four year long search, Niall believes that he's finally found the demons hiding place, but doesn't know if he has the strength anymore to breach the lair and slay the fiend. And so he seeks the aid of the PCs. Naturally, the changeling dare not share his secret with them and so approaches them in disguise (easy enough) and constructs a suitable story about lost treasure. Of course, both he and Naf are following close behind the PCs, watching and alternately helping and hindering them. The PCs may wonder what is going on when they seem to have both a mysterious ally and a shadowy enemy stalking them. But this is nothing to the final battle in the demon's well-guarded lair. Can the PCs count on Niall in the final battle or will he turn on them and destroy them all? And more to the point, was the story about treasure true or not?